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A Feminist Visual Content Analysis of College-Level Textile and Apparel Textbooks 1970s-2010: Intersections of Gender, Race, and Size

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Scholars have examined the representations of individuals in a variety of avenues by utilizing visual, audiovisual, and textual analysis. Commeyras and Alvermann (1996) examined representations of women in world history textbooks, and found the text perpetuated gender stereotypes. Evans and Davies (2000) analyzed masculinity representations in school-aged children's textbooks, and found the males were most often depicted as aggressive or competitive. Researchers also found Physical Education textbooks portrayed males and females in stereotypical roles and mostly depicted males in physically active positions (Táboas-Pais & Rey-Cao, 2012). If we as a discipline acknowledge that we need to include and recognize more diversity within our organization (Lee, Lee, & Ulasewicz, 2011), we felt it was only appropriate to critically analyze the products we are disseminating and promoting within our classrooms.

No scholars have examined the imagery or representations within our textbooks; therefore, with a feminist lens, this study asks who is represented or not represented in our textile and apparel textbooks? How are individuals represented? Have these representations changed over time? Lastly, how are gender differences portrayed? It is our goal to unearth and expose how scholars in our field chose to represent individuals in the texts, which are integral components to textile and apparel majors' learning experience in the classroom. We ask these questions because these are the students who will enter the fashion industry to create and recreate images of beauty within fashion, media, advertising, and/or design. Our study is informed by the "feminist perspective" as we are "critically interrogating the texts" produced for our discipline to understand and disentangle representations that may influence how gender and beauty are recreated or redefined within the industry in the future (Leavy, 2007, p. 224).

To answer the research questions, the researchers used visual content analysis. They examined 17 books that were published between 1972 and 2010. Six of the books were published in the 1970s, 3 in the 1980s, 4 in the 1990s, and 3 in the 2010s. The researchers chose books that covered merchandising, management, and design topics. The researchers purposefully chose not to include cultural or social/psychological aspects of appearance related texts because these books often focused on diverse populations, and likely have more diverse representations.

A total of 1715 images were coded. These images included both line drawings and photographs. Images were only coded if they included at least from the bust/chest up to the head, if at least half of the face was visible, and if facial features were present. Each person represented in the text was coded in 6 categories including: gender, race, hair length, hair texture, body size, and body posture. The coding categories were pre-determined and evolved as the data collection process unfolded. Coding options within each category were defined and redefined in a codebook as the researchers came across images that did not fit within the existing categories.

The researchers used a body-size scale with numerical codes from 1-7, where 1 was the smallest and 7 was the largest. The researchers constantly compared the images to the definitions for each code in order to ensure reliability in the coding process. The researcher's checked intercoder reliability by coding and comparing results for 10% of the data. The coders continued comparing results until an 85% intercoder reliability was established.

Within the texts there were 1436 women, 273 men, and six gender-neutral people. In total there were 1372 white people (80%), 21 people of color (1.2%), 101 of Asian descent (5.8%), 66 of African descent (3.8%), five of Indian descent (0.2%), and three of Hispanic descent (0.1%). Images were assigned "people of color" if the race of the person of color was indistinguishable. For women, body sizes included: size 1 (0.3%), size 2 (14.6%), size 3 (65%), size 4 (11.4%), size 5 (8.2%), size 6 (0.2%), and size 7 (0%). For men, body sizes included: size 1 (0%), size 2 (1.4%), size 3 (52.4%), size 4 (38%), size 5 (20%), size 6 (0.3%), and size 7 (0.3%). For body posture, 22.4% of women were in dominant positions, 49.4% in neutral, 10.7% in closed off, and 17.5% in mixed dominant/closed off positions. Men included 29.7% in dominant, 57% in neutral, 6.8% in closed off, and 9.6% in mixed dominant/closed off positions. Hair length results will be described in detail; however, results indicated that most females had longer hair lengths, while men had shorter, closer to the head lengths. Of the African descent individuals represented in the texts, none had dreaded hair, 59% had a natural hairstyle, and the rest had straightened hair.

Imagery in the texts are overwhelmingly represented by white individuals. For both men and women the majority of body sizes were rated at a 3 out of 7. Men and women were mostly in neutral positions, yet men had a higher percentage of dominant positions, and a lower percentage of closed-off positions. The visibility of the dominant ideology of women's beauty (white, thin, longer hair, and docile bodies) is evident in the representations throughout the texts, and highlights the invisibility of other marginalized groups. Bringing attention to these representations is central to the feminist analysis (Leavy, 2007), and indicates the need for more diversity overall. Results indicate that representations in diversity did not change over time. Future studies can examine representations within Social/Psychological textile and apparel textbooks. Scholars can also examine more texts within each decade.

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